

## APPENDIX RAPE, RACE, AND RHETORIC The Rape Myth in Historiographical Perspective

he American South's hysterical fear of black men as rapists, often referred to as the "rape myth" or "rape complex," is well documented and has been memorialized in the pages of fiction and nonfiction alike for over a hundred years. Two works of fiction illustrate the dichotomy of characterizations that have attempted to encapsulate the rape myth. Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*, sympathetic to the plight of white southerners after the Civil War, accepted the view that black men were innately barbaric and libidinous. Unable to restrain their animalistic passions, these black brutes gratified their lust by raping young (always young, always virginal) white women whose only recourse after such a heinous outrage was suicide.

This stereotype predominated in the first half of the twentieth century, but was eventually challenged. Authors, scholars, and contemporaries, sickened by the swelling numbers of black men lynched each year, ostensibly for raping white women, launched searing criticisms of the white South in an effort to expose the stereotype as sham, the "cry rape" a ruse. Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird was written in this vein and remains one of the most enduring and familiar monuments to the lethal consequences of accusing a black man of raping a white woman in the South. It chronicles the plight of a black man, Tom Robinson, wrongly accused by a poor, disreputable white woman whose rebuffed sexual advances were observed by her irate, reprobate father. Tom's tragic death is inevitable from the start, no matter the exculpatory evidence, the unimpeachability of his character, or the questionable character of his accuser. Because he was a black man on trial for rape in a southern town, justice eluded him. Despite the contrasting messages of each of these novels, implicit in both is the assumption that most white southerners believed black men predisposed to raping white women.

Fictional accounts of black rape could not rival the unimaginable atrocities committed in the American South in the name of avenging the rape of white women. The South witnessed numerous lynchings, many ostensibly of black men who had raped white women, whose only real crime may have been an inadvertent glance at a white woman that extended for a moment too long to be deemed appropriate. As portrayed in both The Clansman and To Kill a Mockingbird, threats to white women by black men in the South, real or perceived, were often capital offenses. More than likely, an accused black rapist did not even make it to trial. If he did make it to trial against all odds, as Tom did, the outcome was all but foreordained. Either before his arrest or after, a mob, often abetted by local law officials, would seize the alleged black rapist and murder him. The most notorious demonstration of the "rape complex" at its ugliest and most extreme was of course the trial of the "Scottsboro boys" in the 1930s. The nation, indeed the world, was mesmerized by the egregious injustice and naked racial discrimination that Alabama authorities were trying to pawn off as justice. Scores of other alleged black-on-white rape cases that never approached the Scottsboro trial in notoriety dotted the southern landscape.2

Americans over the years have shaped their conceptions of the "black-beast-rapist" from this hybrid of popular and historical presentations of the "rape myth." In recent times, two seemingly incontrovertible maxims have emerged. One, underlying Lee's novel, is that all a southern white woman had to do was "cry rape" and the white community would unconditionally unite behind her, demanding revenge. Both Lee and Dixon would concur on the second assumption: retribution was swift and fatal. To be a black man accused of raping or attempting to rape a white woman in the American South was to face certain death, at the hands of either the executioner or an angry mob. The historical and popular consensus has been that these two facets of the rape myth have been a constant throughout southern history.<sup>3</sup>

The rape myth has long been fodder for intellectual and scholarly consumption. For much of the twentieth century, sociologists, psychologists, physicians, and historians have analyzed and scrutinized the white South's preoccupation with black male sexuality, frequently referred to as the "southern rape complex." Regardless of the discipline, these scholars have reached many of the same conclusions about the rape myth, but a good number have been predicated on untested assumptions. Also problematic is that historical studies of the rape myth have typically relied on the same sources, tracts written by well-educated white southerners, whose theories

about race and rape have been accepted as applicable to all white southerners, including poorer whites. As a result, almost all that we know about the rape myth is divined from prolific and very racist elite southerners. A final consideration is that the road that maps the historiography of the rape myth has sharp bends and switchbacks that have confounded many unwitting travelers. Historians writing about the rape myth have been understandably influenced by the political and social circumstances of their own times. As a result, what has been presented as historical fact about the rape myth is not always borne out by the evidence.

In his seminal work *Mind of the South* (1941), Wilbur J. Cash is gener-**▲** ally credited with invoking the term "rape complex" in characterizing white fears of black rape. Cash, a native southerner, denied contemporary racist claims about the prevalence of black sexual assault, laying greater odds that a white woman would be struck by lightning before she would be raped by a black man.<sup>5</sup> Cash was the first to link the twentieth-century rape fear to the antebellum period. The origins of the "rape complex," he explained, lay squarely in antebellum slave society, which placed the white woman on a pedestal and worshipped her as the symbol of virtue, honor, and chastity: "She was the South's Palladium, this Southern woman—the shield bearing Athena gleaming whitely in the clouds, the standard for its rallying, the mystic symbol of its nationality in the face of the foe. She was the lily pure maid . . . and Mother of God. Merely to mention her was to send strong men into tears—or shouts. There was hardly a sermon that did not begin and end with tributes in her honor." Southern white men, Cash claimed, deified their women, a practice he termed "gyneolatry," which purged white women of their sexuality and made them sexually inaccessible. These same men, Cash wrote, turned instead to slave women to satisfy their lust. Over time, white southerners came to identify white womanhood with the South itself: "What southerners felt, therefore, was that any assertion of any kind on the part of the Negro constituted in a perfectly real manner an attack on the Southern woman."7

A work that preceded *Mind of the South* by several years, John Dollard's *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1937), was actually the earliest scholarly work to make a connection between sex and race in southern culture. Dollard, a northern white sociologist, spent five months living in Indianola, Mississippi, which he referred to by the pseudonym "Southerntown." He lived among the townspeople, observed, conversed, interviewed, and recorded. His findings were thus based largely on impressions, and despite his intentions he often unwittingly accepted white assertions at face value. Although his pur-

view was southern race relations, Dollard also scrutinized sexual motives, which he saw as underlying the relationships between class and caste.<sup>8</sup>

Dollard's analysis of southern white rape fears, like Cash's, was heavily influenced by the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud. Dollard studied under Freud's disciples including Karen Horney, and he spent a year studying at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute. His work is so heavily indebted to Freud and his theories that Dollard confessed, "The writings and views of Freud have become so thoroughly worked through my thinking that I had rather ascribe to him a major orientation of my thought than cite him as frequently as I would otherwise have to."9

Dollard's analysis of the southern rape complex relied extensively on psychoanalytic theories about repression, projection, and the subconscious. For example, in holding white men responsible for perpetuating fears of black rape, Dollard suspected that the white men of Indianola possessed a subconscious "fear of reprisal for the things they do to Negro women." He also posited jealousy as an animating force among white men. White men viewed black men, believed to be virile and especially "capable" in the sexual sphere, as sexual competitors: "The idea seems to be that [black males] are more like savages, nearer to animal, and that their sexual appetites are more vigorous and ungoverned." This perception, in conjunction with the widespread belief in the "dangerous size of the genitalia" of Negro males, magnified white notions of black male sexual prowess while underscoring white male sexual inadequacy. Dollard suggested that white men, unconsciously jealous of virile black men, assuaged their jealousy by projecting on to black males extraordinary sexual potency.

Paradoxically, while Dollard intellectually acknowledged base motives for white anxiety about black sexuality, he nonetheless devoted considerable discussion to black motives for raping white women, thus validating in part the white belief in blacks' propensity to rape. Dollard believed that the rape of white women was not the *conscious* intention of most blacks ("there is no widespread overt prevalence of such wishes"). But, he continued, if the "unconscious, repressed and seldom realized wishes of Negroes are taken into account, it may be that the white caste is correct in this assumption." Citing the "superior prestige position of the white woman and her categorical inaccessibility," Dollard took for granted that black men would find the allure of white women irresistible. Dollard appears to have projected onto black men his own feelings about masculinity; rape as retaliation seemed an entirely logical consequence to him. Revenge, he surmised, seemed the most likely motive for black rape of white women. Black men who could not protect their

own women from the sexual forays of white men sought retribution through rape. The "Negro is wreaking on a symbolic member of the white caste the impotent rage which he so frequently feels at the seduction of his own women by white men." Black men experienced constant jealousy and hatred because of the sexual affronts to their women. Dollard undermined his own conclusion that preoccupation with black rape was an irrational fear when he speculated about black motives for raping white women, the fundamental premise of which was that black men did indeed rape white women.<sup>13</sup>

Lillian Smith, a white southern liberal like Cash, expanded on the rape myth in a searing criticism of the South, an autobiographical work entitled called *Killers of the Dream* (1949). <sup>14</sup> Smith had grown up in the segregated South and as an adult became horrified by the injustice and degradation heaped upon the region's blacks. Like Cash, she blamed the exaltation of sacred womanhood for poisoning white minds with the unfounded fear of black sexual assault. White men, she wrote, warned of the "'menace' of Negro men hiding behind every cypress waiting to rape 'our' women." <sup>15</sup> Also like Cash, Smith laid the origins of the rape myth at the doorstep of antebellum slave society. Because of the deified, desexualized status of white women, white men had turned to slave women to satisfy their sexual urges: "The more trails the white man made to backyard cabins, the higher he raised his white wife on her pedestal when he returned to the big house. The higher the pedestal, the less he enjoyed her whom he had put there." <sup>16</sup>

Thus the earliest analysts of the southern "rape complex" diagnosed the phenomenon as the consequence of large-scale sexual and psychological dysfunction, a direct legacy of slavery. Central to their arguments was the adulation of white womanhood as well as white male jealousy of black sexual virility. What became obvious for a generation steeped in Freudian psychoanalytic theory was that the white South had been plagued by a "rape complex." Analysts of the South, utilizing the psychoanalytic tools and methodology of Freud, put both black and white southerners on the couch. The first historical treatment of the southern rape complex borrowed heavily from these earlier studies of Cash and Dollard. 17

The relationship between sex and race was at long last examined anew in a major historical work in 1968. Winthrop D. Jordan, through his massive and much revered work *White over Black*, offered the first real intellectual and historical insight into the complex relationship between whites' sexual anxiety and race. Jordan expanded upon the work of the "Cash school" by grafting its ideas onto the historical treatments of slavery and race. Cash's ideas on white

womanhood, for example, were developed and elaborated upon by Jordan, who traced the glorification of white women to early English efforts to populate and colonize New World settlements. Jordan wrote that "white women were, quite literally, the repositories of white civilization. White men tended to place them protectively upon a pedestal and then run off to gratify their passions elsewhere."18 Jordan theorized that guilt-ridden white men who sexually exploited slave women and who were jealous of presumed black male potency projected their own sexual desires onto slave men, in the process creating an irrational fear of black male sexuality. "It is not we, but others, who are guilty. It is not we who lust, but they."19 The white image of black males as sexual beasts was further enhanced, Jordan argued, by the association of the black male with superhuman sexual potency, a perception that had its origins long before the colonization of the New World. The earliest English encounters with Africa and Africans firmly implanted racist notions about bestiality and licentiousness onto the minds of Englishmen. By coincidence, the discovery of the African and the ape simultaneously sparked the imaginations of curious Europeans. Englishmen wedded these early impressions of Africans to the particulars of slavery. In the slave South, partial nudity resulting from illfitting clothing, gossip about penis size, and divergent codes of sexuality between white southerners and their African slaves further fueled white beliefs about black licentiousness.20

Jordan's conjectures on the ties between race and sex have had an enormous influence on studies of southern and race history. Later historians took their Freudian cue from White over Black and expanded upon projection as the cornerstone of the rape complex. Furthermore, they built upon Jordan's contention that white views about black male sexual potency existed during slavery, perpetuating the assumption that white fears of black ravishment pervaded southern society before the Civil War. The fear, Earl Thorpe argued, was "not of the slave's barbarism, but of his revenge." Thorpe continued, "The slave was feared as an apparition lurking outside the white man's door, or peeping and leering at the keyhole or window, ready to wreak havoc and destruction."21 Lawrence Friedman hypothesized that as white slaveholders recalled how they "craved interracial affairs, many of them probably projected their desires upon black bondsmen: as they desired Negro females, black males could seek revenge by assaulting white women."22 Peter Wood saw broad societal implications of the rape myth in colonial South Carolina. "The increasing white obsession with physical violation . . . must be taken as an integral part of the white minority's struggle for social control. . . . Slaves were becoming a more numerous and distinctive group, and their very real efforts toward social and economic self assertion prompted the anxious white minority to fantasies of ravishment."<sup>23</sup>

Attesting to the staying power of Jordan's theories on white perceptions about black male sexuality is the more recent work by Peter Bardaglio in which he claims that antebellum white southerners, "both inside and outside the legal system, widely shared the belief that black men were obsessed with the desire to rape white women."<sup>24</sup>

A number of historians have also perpetuated the idea that black rape of white women in the antebellum South, as in the period after the war, was perceived as especially heinous and precipitated the same vitriolic response in retribution: lynching. "It goes almost without saying," wrote Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "that the penalty for a slave who dared lust after white women's flesh was castration, first by the law of the slave code, later by community justice alone."<sup>25</sup> Generalizations such as this one presume that nineteenth-century southerners were animated purely, if not solely, by race, that all white citizens, acting in response to their own whiteness, automatically rallied around a white woman accusing a black man of rape. Such an approach minimizes the complexities in the lives of these people and reduces them to one-dimensional caricatures.

The powerful and long-lasting influence of Cash, Jordan, and their followers on race and sex cannot be overstated. Later scholars from the field of history, as well as in other disciplines, have deferred to these figures as the definitive authorities on race and sex in the American South. As important as their groundbreaking works have been to students of race, however, some aspects merit critical reassessment.

Most fundamentally, these scholars have projected postbellum assumptions into colonial and antebellum southern culture, in the process finding widespread sexual anxiety where in fact it did not exist.<sup>26</sup> Observers of a South steeped in fears of black men as sexual aggressors, they found it nearly impossible to imagine a time in the region's history when whites did not fear the "black beast."

A spate of recent works specifically on sexuality and race in the Old South has done much to discredit assertions that the antebellum South was rife with white anxiety about black rape. Martha Hodes's *White Women, Black Men* disputes claims that white fear of rape was universal among southern whites. By examining various contexts in which black men and white women were intimate, whether through marriage, adultery, or premarital sex, Hodes persuasively challenges claims by Jordan and others that such encounters would likely have resulted in retribution by a unified white community. Rather than

find that white communities were repulsed by interracial sexual relationships and intolerant of them, Hodes documents numerous instances when white citizens tolerated illicit acts that would have precipitated a harsh and swift response by whites had they occurred in the early twentieth century.

Writing elsewhere about black-on-white rape in the antebellum period, my work has shored up Hodes's claims. I traced the reaction of southern whites to charges of black rape and found that the typical response was restrained and deferential to the judicial process; lynching of accused black rapists in the antebellum era was in fact rare in contrast to the late nineteenth century, when fears of black sexual aggression were rampant. In many cases I demonstrated that whites were quite divided, often along class lines, by accusations of black rape. White elites frequently sided with their slaves who stood accused of rape, denigrated the character of poor white accusers, and utilized the legal apparatus to exonerate their slaves. Failing that, they often mounted aggressive petition campaigns to appeal for gubernatorial pardons, in the process smearing the reputation of the white female accusers. The work of Hodes and others on similar topics, as well as my own, lays bare the fluidity and diversity of white attitudes about sexual relations between white women and black men. This diversity was not taken into account in the analysis of Jordan and many who followed his lead, or was perhaps dismissed as consisting of pesky but insignificant exceptions. Antebellum white southerners tolerated sexual congress between black men and white women as long it was not flaunted. More recent research, focusing specifically on race and sexuality in the South, has definitively debunked two long-held assumptions about sex and race in the Old South. First, the rigid taboo against interracial sex (specifically sex between black men and white women) was not present with the introduction of slavery, as Jordan claimed, but rather evolved over time in response to the emancipation of slaves and the granting of political agency to black men. And second, sex between women and black men, despite harsh statutes prohibiting it, was not so remarkable, not so extraordinary after all. Indeed, recent scholarship documents widespread examples of interracial sexual relationships that belie white fears of black male sexuality.<sup>27</sup>

Another implicit assumption embraced by Jordan and others was that white females in southern society were passionless. Because southern elites deified their women, they effectively cordoned them off from sex, psychologically forcing white men to bed their slaves. And because white men could not freely enjoy sex with white women, they imagined that these white women were lusted after by black men. But this presumed frigidity of southern elite women has come under considerable challenge in recent years. Letters and diaries

written by southern women suggest that southern elite women certainly embraced sexuality, or at least did not shy away from it. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, for one, clarifies an important point. She claims that neither the conventions of ladyhood nor the male code of honor, frequently offered up to explain southern women's aversion to sex, denied female sexuality: "Slaveholding culture emphasized control of female sexuality; it did not deny its existence." To the contrary, the diaries and letters of slaveholding elite women convey the passion and joy that these women experienced and longed for in loving relationships with their husbands.<sup>28</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall also has assailed those historians who have accepted as fact the presumed lack of passion among women of the Old South. Such a position, she argues, assumes that "white women were bad lovers and white southerners had bad sex."<sup>29</sup>

If we look at the arguments of Jordan and Cash anew, equipped with the findings of recent scholarship, they lose their plausibility. If white women were sexually active, there was no compelling reason for white men to turn to slaves for sex (though certainly many did), no reason to project their own sexual desires onto black men. Furthermore, knowledge that sexual relations between white women and black men were far more common in the antebellum South than previously thought, and that those relationships (or dalliances) were frequently tolerated by white neighbors, casts suspicion on claims that whites were overwhelmed with worry about black sexual aggression.

It is curious that twentieth-century historians have found sexual anxiety about black rape among antebellum white southerners when white southerners themselves writing after the war did not. The late-nine-teenth-century radical racists who argued against educating and enfranchising blacks, so as not to exacerbate the "race problem," tended to romanticize the relations between slave and master. Turn-of-the-century men and women of letters often denied that slaves of the Old South had posed any sexual threat to white women. Animated by perceived changes in the "New Negro," increases in the black population, and a growing political threat, many authorities of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth waxed nostalgic about the cross-racial plantation family.<sup>30</sup>

Central to the reasoning of turn-of-the century race commentators was the denial that slaves of the Old South had posed a sexual threat to white women. White mistresses did not fear slave men then because of "the natural trust and affection subsisting between the two races." During the antebellum era, these southern apologists argued, illiterate, unschooled blacks rarely raped white women. Even during the Civil War, when white male protectors were away from

the plantation, women had nothing to fear when left alone with their male slaves. Henry McHattan had grown up on a Louisiana plantation where, he reminisced, "there was no lock between any Negro and my mother's bedroom. My father was often absent. During the war there were thousands of white women on isolated plantations alone under the care of the slaves for months, and even years. Many women made trips through the country day and night alone in charge of Negro drivers. If this trust was ever betrayed, I have never heard of it." Dr. Hunter McGuire of Richmond prefaced his remarks about blacks' "sexual perversion" with his belief that before "the late War between the States, a rape by a Negro of a white woman was almost unknown." Atticus Haygood could recall but a single case of such a crime before the war, and that offender was burned. W. Cabell Bruce proffered that during the Civil War, "and for many years after the war, unsettled as some of these years were, [the black man] was rarely known to violate a white woman."

Even early-twentieth-century historians were seduced by this romanticizing of the Old South Negro. Walter Fleming recorded it as historical fact: "In no known instance was the trust [by the slave's master] misplaced. There was no insubordination among the negroes, no threat of violence. . . . Women and children felt safer then, when nearly all the white men were away, than they have ever felt since among free negroes."<sup>36</sup>

Itemporaries claimed, then when did the myth emerge, according to white southerners? If male slaves who had lived in familial and spatial intimacy with white women, at times in the absence of white men, posed no sexual threat, what accounts for their transformation into ravishers? Many of the radical racists from the turn of the century placed the origins of the black "rape problem" in Reconstruction. Myrta Lockett Avary, for one, squarely blamed northern interlopers for the perceptible change in African Americans' demeanor and for the rise in cases of black-on-white rape, which was "a development of a period when the negro was dominated by political, religious and social advisors from the North, and by the attitude of the northern press and pulpit. It was practically unknown in wartime, when negroes were left on plantations as protectors and guardians of white women and children."<sup>37</sup>

Avary's was not a lone voice in blaming the South's race "problems" on hated Reconstruction policies. Fiction too began to mimic such contemporary reminiscences, and finding a very receptive audience, helped perpetuate the stereotype of the naïve freedman duped by northern interlopers into believing that "social equality" was a well-deserved complement to political equality.

The Reconstruction novel became a popular new genre in American fiction at the turn of the century outside as well as within the South. Sympathetic to the white South, hopelessly didactic, steeped in racial stereotypes, and casting scalawags and carpetbaggers as despicable and carnivorous, the novels portrayed freedmen as lustful, gullible, and easily manipulated. Well-meaning but disillusioned northerners fell victim to their own misguided racial good will. And nary a Reconstruction novel failed to have a climactic scene in which a savage, beastlike freedman raped a young, virtuous, white maiden, who if she survived would suffer "a fate worse than death."

One of the first of these novels was *Smoking Flax* (1897), by Hallie Erminie Rives of Kentucky. In the story Elliott Harding, a southerner by birth relocated to the North as a child, returns to his family homestead after the war and is deeply disturbed by the deplorable state of race relations in the region, particularly the outbreak of lynching. At one point he finds himself engaged in a debate about lynching with a native who chides, "When the sanctity of woman is violated, man, if he be, cannot but choose to avenge it." Southern masculinity was thus contingent upon a man's willingness to defend womanly virtue and honor by taking the life of the black offender. Women's roles are carefully scripted throughout the work. Women are repeatedly urged to exercise caution and rely on their men for protection. Only foolhardy women flout convention and local custom. One such reckless woman in *Smoking Flax*, described as having a "spirit of independence," fails to heed the locals' warnings against unchaperoned visits and is later found murdered.<sup>39</sup>

In keeping with contemporary reminiscences of slavery that idealized relations between master and servant, one member of the local elite in *Smoking Flax* lauded the slaves' loyalty during the war: "Mid the stormy scenes a quarter of a century ago, when the bugle called the sons of the south to war, they went, leaving their wives, mothers, children and homes in the hands of slaves who, though their personal interests were on the other side, were true to their trust, protected the helpless women and children . . . and never one raised an arm to molest the helpless." <sup>40</sup> The description further served to highlight the change in the "New Negro" since emancipation.

Despite the sage advice of native white southerners, Elliott continues to reject traditional race and gender conventions. He finds himself enamored with a young southern maiden whom he sets out to make his bride. Three weeks before their wedding, Elliott travels north to seek support for a school that he proposes to build for southern blacks. Elliott arrives back in town to hear news of a mob forming to lynch a local no-good Negro, Ephraim Cooley. Unaware of Cooley's crime and true to his misguided humanitarianism, Elliott

rushes off to the jail to foil the mob's plans. Not until he gets there does he learn that the black man sought by the mob was the one accused of raping and murdering his beloved Dorothy, whom Elliott had left behind alone and unprotected. Distraught and in shock, Elliott nonetheless sticks to his principles and allows official justice to take its course. Justice, however, is cruelly delayed by a defense request for a continuance, which is granted. When the trial resumes a guilty verdict is returned, only to be thwarted again by a dramatic, last-minute stay by the governor. Anxious and conflicted, Elliott can no longer restrain his masculine impulse to avenge the honor of his deflowered, dead fiancée: he races to the train that is about to whisk Ephraim Cooley to a safe haven and shoots him through the heart. The reader is left to conclude that justice has indeed been served, and Elliott's misplaced humanitarianism is remedied.

The year after Smoking Flax was published, Red Rock, another Reconstruction novel, appeared. The author, Thomas Nelson Page, borrowed heavily from contemporary accounts of Reconstruction. In Red Rock, nefarious scalawags and carpetbaggers seize control of the political apparatus and use their positions to confiscate property of loyal white southerners who cannot afford the high taxes they are now required to pay by the illegitimately elected officials. Honorable white men who served in the war are forced to flee or risk being jailed on trumped-up charges. The "black-beast-rapist" in the novel is Moses, a freedman turned preacher whose repulsive appearance is likened to that of a "reptile" and "beast." He happens upon Ruth, a young northern woman, who like Elliott in Smoking Flax disapproves of white southern vigilante justice, is aghast at reports of the Ku Klux Klan, and ignores local advice not to go off alone. Flouting the wise advice of southern whites, Ruth predictably encounters a menacing, lurking Moses; he runs off, frightened by the approach of Steve, a southern man of honor who comes to the rescue before the unthinkable can happen. Although Moses eludes the authorities he is lynched several years later, and once again, justice is served.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps no author was more successful in writing Reconstruction novels than Thomas Dixon.<sup>42</sup> One prominent historian has claimed that Dixon "probably did more to shape the lives of modern Americans than have some Presidents."<sup>43</sup> Like other authors of the genre, Dixon used literature to document what he saw as the retrogression of southern blacks and the danger of northern benevolence toward them. As in the work of Rives and Page, a black-on-white rape scene is a staple in Dixon's postwar fiction.

Dixon's first novel, *The Leopard's Spots*, appeared in 1903, but *The Clansman* (1905) is better known, in large part because D. W. Griffith transformed it into

the popular film, *Birth of a Nation* ten years later. The books have similar themes and caricatures. Both novels laud a proud past when slaves and master cared for each other, and decry the shattering of familial ties by the unwanted intrusion of northern carpetbaggers and treasonous scalawags. Both portray freedmen as lustful savages lurking in the shadows and threatening unprotected, unsuspecting white women and children. And both include inflammatory black-on-white rape scenes as tragic denouements justifying the "birth of a nation," the birth of the Ku Klux Klan.

In *The Clansman*, for example, Gus is a former slave who attacks Marion, a sweet, young, white, southern woman. "Gus stepped closer, with an ugly leer, his flat nose dilated, his sinister bead eyes wide apart, gleaming apelike, as he laughed. . . . The girl uttered a cry, long, tremulous, heart-rending, piteous. A single tiger spring, and the black claws of the beast sank into the soft white throat and she was still."<sup>44</sup> Forever tainted, Marion and her mother, tarnished by association, resolve to commit suicide together. What other choice is there? "The thought of life is torture. Only those who hate me would wish that I live."<sup>45</sup> In melodramatic fashion, characteristic of the Reconstruction novel, the pair, hand in hand, throw themselves off a steep cliff to escape a life of ignominy.

Although casting his work as fiction, Dixon relied heavily on the political culture of North Carolina for his inspiration. In *The Leopard's Spots* an eleven-year-old white child, Flora Camp, is found ravaged and beaten by a "brute," left for dead. "Flora lay on the ground with her clothes torn to shreds and stained with blood. Her beautiful yellow curls were matted across her forehead in a dark red lump beside a wound where her skull had been crushed."<sup>46</sup> The incendiary scene, according to Glenda Gilmore, historian of the Jim Crow South, came directly from the pages of North Carolina's Democratic newspapers, which reported a similar scene in 1898 in Concord. Gilmore asserts that it was virtually impossible to extricate racist propaganda, fiction in its own right, from fact at the turn of the century. White supremacist campaigns for disfranchisement and segregation carried the day. The press bombarded the South with stories about black criminality, including black-on-white-rape. The typical literate southerner, even if he or she read few books, could not escape daily accounts of black crime in the newspapers.<sup>47</sup>

This curious melding of fiction and political propaganda soon received validation as historical fact by professional historians. The best-known and influential of these Reconstruction historians was William Archibald Dunning, who taught at Columbia University from 1886 to 1922. Dunning and his students, collectively called the "Dunning school," incorporated popular per-

ceptions about Reconstruction into the history books. The period, they wrote, was characterized by misrule and corruption at the hands of fiendish scalawags and carpetbaggers who manipulated childlike freedmen by holding out the plums of suffrage and political equality. Self-serving radical Republicans from the North, lacking firsthand experience with large numbers of blacks, committed a grave mistake in granting political rights to southern freedmen, because their doing so gave blacks unrealistic expectations about their future and ultimately led to aspirations for social equality with whites.<sup>48</sup>

In *Reconstruction*, *Political and Economic*, 1865–1877 (1907), Dunning traced the tragic path from freedom to social chaos for "the mass of barbarous freedmen." The cruel promise of political equality gave blacks delusions about social equality: "With civil rights and political power, not won, but almost forced upon him, [the southern Negro] came gradually to understand and crave those more elusive privileges that constitute social equality. . . . It played a part . . . in the hideous crime against white womanhood which now assumed new meaning in the annals of outrage."

Dunning's most influential student was Walter L. Fleming, who like his mentor portrayed the Reconstruction South as lawless and governed by ne'erdo-well whites and inept or nefarious blacks. Negroes were "poisoned against their former masters by listening to lying whites" from the North. After the war, Fleming wrote, "the worst class of negroes . . . [became] insolent and violent in their newfound freedom. Murders were frequent, and outrages upon women were beginning to be heard of." Fleming explained that as the restraints of slavery had been removed, blacks fell into criminality. "The crime of rape became common, caused largely, the whites believed, by the social equality theories of the reconstructionists." <sup>51</sup>

Two decades later historical treatments of Reconstruction continued to follow the lead of William Dunning. In *The Tragic Era* (1929) Claude G. Bowers reiterated these themes and representations, including the freedman as a new, menacing sexual threat. Freedom for the slaves, he wrote, meant the freedom to indulge in sexual promiscuity. With these newly freed slaves, "armed and in easy reach of liquor, the shadow of an awful fear rested upon the women of the communities where they were stationed."<sup>52</sup>

Bowers, like the historians, novelists, and race commentators who preceded him, denied that enslaved African American males had ever posed a sexual threat to white women: "Throughout the war, when men were far away on the battlefields, and the women were alone on far plantations with the slaves, hardly a woman was attacked. Then came the scum of northern society, emissaries of the politicians, soldiers of fortune, and not a few degenerates, inflam-

ing the negroes' egotism, and soon the lustful assaults began. Rape is the foul daughter of Reconstruction."53

Thus the myth of the black rapist was validated as historical fact by members of the historical profession.<sup>54</sup> Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*, the North Carolina white supremacy campaign of the late 1890s, and William Dunning's *Reconstruction* all essentially told the same story: the black threat of rape was unprecedented and it was real.

It was not until 1918 that Ulrich B. Phillips, himself a student of William Dunning, would challenge this sanguine portrait of the sexually nonthreatening male slave. In his classic work, American Negro Slavery, Phillips documented 105 cases of slave rape or attempted rape in Virginia from 1780 to 1864, as well as a smattering of similar cases in five other southern states. In doing so, Phillips debunked the myth of the innocuous slave, discrediting the "oft asserted Southern tradition that negroes never violated white women before slavery was abolished."55 This stance might strike an informed reader as inconsistent with Phillips's well-known portrayal of slaves as docile and content with their bonded status. But in discussing "abundant crime" by slaves, including rape, Phillips meant to demonstrate the benevolence of the southern judicial system as well as the paternalism and humanitarianism of slaveowners. Not coincidentally, Phillips documented numerous acquittals of slaves for serious offenses, as well as a pattern of lenient punishment. Furthermore, he asserted that the felonies with which slaves were charged were generally viewed as "criminal regardless of the status of the perpetrators." By implication, southern jurisprudence was colorblind, with "considerable impartiality to malefactors of both races and conditions."56

Phillips's contemporaries conveniently disregarded his important qualification about black rape and slavery. They chose instead to construct a nostalgic, but flawed, myth about congenial relations under slavery that was a useful prop in seeking to prove black retrogression in the late nineteenth century. Denying that black men had ever posed a sexual threat before emancipation became an important tenet of those who argued that a "race problem" was facing the region. Analysts reported that the black population had begun to "relapse" into barbarism. Black rape, implicitly black-on-white rape, was discussed in print in the larger context of increased black crime or as an example of Negro "degeneracy."

The literary piece usually credited with inaugurating the debate about the black male propensity to rape white women was a book written by Philip Alexander Bruce in 1889 entitled the *Plantation Negro White as a Freeman*.

Bruce's discussion of rape was limited to a few paragraphs in which he assessed the current race problem. Like many to follow, he traced what he perceived to be changes in the freedman since emancipation and observed a pattern of deterioration. He cited as evidence an increase in black crime and sexual immorality, coupled with a notable decline in respect for whites, as well as an increasingly "aggressive disposition." 57 Though rape was not the most frequent crime committed by blacks, according to Bruce, it certainly was the "most frightful crime." The black man's tendency toward raping white women stemmed from his innate attraction to women of the white race. "There is something strangely alluring and seductive to them in the appearance of a white woman; they are aroused and stimulated by its foreignness to their experience of sexual pleasures, and it moves them to gratify their lust at any cost and in spite of every obstacle."58 White women of all classes, aware of this unnatural attraction, "are afraid to venture out to any distance alone." 59 In addition, Bruce continued, blacks saw the rape of white women as a means of exacting vengeance for years of white domination.

There followed a veritable flood of racist diatribes in the 1890s, many of which focused on black rape of white women. The common thread through all the literary pieces is the acceptance as fact that black rape was on the rise. "Why is it that the Negro has become such an habitual offender against female virtue in the South?" The crime of a Negro assaulting a white woman or female child seems to be growing in frequency." The "alarming frequency of the most brutal outrages upon white women and children have excited the serious apprehension of every good citizen." Atticus Haygood acknowledged the "unmistakable increase of this crime—the assaulting of white women by Negro men." And Walter Hine Page assured his readers that "competent observers in almost every part of the South agree that crimes against white women by Negroes are becoming very much more frequent." These incendiary missives, in many cases written by well-known authors, appeared in print frequently, lending authority and credibility to "the rape myth" among most white southerners—and many outside the South—as the nineteenth century waned.

Popular musings about black rape were seemingly bolstered by scientific studies that set out to examine and quantify the "Negro rape problem" methodically and in the context of a more general trend of regression or decline. In 1896 Frederick L. Hoffman, a statistician employed by the Prudential Insurance Company, published a demographic study tracking racial trends in mortality, disease, miscegenation, crime, and economic conditions. Hoffman claimed that statistics proved blacks to be an inferior and deteriorating race. He compared white and black crime statistics and found that 40.88 percent of

all rapists convicted in 1890 were black, a figure wildly disproportionate to the number of blacks in society. Criminal statistics marshaled for Charleston, South Carolina, from 1889 to 1894 produced even more dramatic results: seventeen of eighteen arrests for rape were of black males. Innate sexual immorality, a propensity for crime, and a tendency for the Negro to "misconstrue personal freedom into personal license" were at the heart of the latest wave of black rape, according to Hoffman.<sup>64</sup>

Medical professionals entered the debate about the "new crime." Two prominent physicians debated the nature of the Negro's "sexual peculiarities." A letter from G. Frank Lydston of Chicago to Hunter McGuire of Charleston, South Carolina, no doubt was a fairly liberal piece for its time. Lydston qualified many of his remarks and alluded to the sexual crimes of white men as well as black men. Nonetheless, he cited numerous factors that he believed accounted for the predisposition of black men to rape white women. One such factor was "hereditary influences descending from the uncivilized ancestors." For example, "When the Ashantee warrior knocks down his prospective bride with a club and drags her off into the woods, he presents an excellent prototype illustration of the criminal acts of the Negro in the United States."65 Despite centuries of civilizing influences, Lydston asserted, such savage ancestral traits were bound to "crop out occasionally." Furthermore, African Americans were imbued with a "defective development . . . of psychological inhibition." Such an intellectual defect, "characteristic of a low grade of civilization," precluded more restrained responses to biologic impulses. The good doctor reminded his correspondent that slavery "merely bottled up the primitive instincts of the Negro race; it did not destroy those instincts."66

Before the late 1880s white southerners had certainly deliberated racial issues, but they had not yet identified black rape as a "problem." Southerners had for years ruminated about the nature of relations between the two races. They speculated on general traits of black southerners, which did indeed include sexual stereotypes, but few, if any, of their accounts characterized African American men as sexually aggressive and a threat to white females. Amalgamation and concerns about black aspirations to "social equality" were discussed by southern theorists, yet the black man was rarely portrayed as a sexual beast, as he would be later.

Paradoxically, discussions of "amalgamation" during the 1880s were steeped in denials that interracial sexual relations were prevalent. Nathaniel Southgate Shaler in 1884 noted the "very rapid reduction in the number of half-breed mulattoes." Shaler did not even consider that such mulattoes could have a black father and a white mother. "It is now rare indeed to see a child under

fifteen that the practiced eye will recognize as from a white father."<sup>68</sup> "The illicit commingling of white and black blood is now practically over," wrote another observer the same year.<sup>69</sup> Senator John T. Morgan of Alabama concurred: "Amalgamation is impossible, because it is forbidden by the instincts of both [races]."<sup>70</sup>

Whether these learned white southerners were accurately reporting post-Reconstruction social conditions, or merely whistling in the dark, eludes us. But certainly there is no evidence that through much of the 1880s they feared black men as rapists. What, then, changed by the 1890s to persuade much of the region that its white female inhabitants were under siege?

By most historical accounts, relations between blacks and whites in the South during the first half or so of the 1880s was characterized by a relative state of racial calm. The occupation of the former Confederacy had ended in the previous decade, allowing many white southern elites and officials to return to the political scene and vie for power. Political developments on the national scene buoyed white southerners' expectations that friends, not foes, would occupy the White House, the Congress, and the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1883 the Court ruled unconstitutional a portion of the odious Civil Rights Act of 1875. In the following year Grover Cleveland, a Democrat, was elected president. Such encouraging national political events, coupled with promising economic hopes for the "New South," proved fertile ground for liberal race ideologies. Racial accommodation and cooperation fed the creed of "New Paternalism," thus enabling white southerners to lapse momentarily into racial neutrality.<sup>71</sup>

The circumstances that had afforded white southerners the luxury of racial good will quickly dissipated, however, and the temporary truce in the race war was shattered. Shortly after Cleveland took office, he shocked southern whites by appointing African American men to federal positions. More frightening still to the white South were the national elections of 1888, which returned the Republican Party, the party of Lincoln and of southern blacks, to power in Congress and the White House. The newly elected Republican Congress promptly horrified the white South by debating the so called Force Bill, a measure that would have appointed a federal supervisor to oversee elections and make the exclusion of black voters illegal. A white South collectively shuddered at the prospect of federal intervention yet again into its political activities.<sup>72</sup>

These political developments in and of themselves may have been sufficient to forge a bunker mentality among white southerners on the race issue. Economic dislocations as well as the urbanization and industrialization that char-

acterized the period further exacerbated the strain between the races and effectively muted the interracial good will that had been touted by racial moderates in the 1880s. White southerners of all classes began to see the region's blacks as scapegoats for their problems.

Such was the scene when Philip Alexander Bruce in 1889 addressed the "problem" of the "black rapist." Bruce and countless others identified a "Negro problem" emerging in the South. An increase in black crime and effrontery was blamed on the "New Negro," who by the 1890s had grown up outside the watchful eye of a master, unfamiliar with proper race etiquette and lacking the restraining features of slavery. Disorderly, reckless, wanton, barbaric, disrespectful—emancipated slaves had reverted to their original state of incivility and savagery, their natural state, which had been so successfully suppressed by their masters' strict control during slavery. This "degeneracy" or "regression" theory brought forth a deluge of racist polemics that continued unabated through the early twentieth century. As evidence that the "New Negro" posed a credible threat to all white southerners, but especially to women, radical racists repeatedly cited instances of black men assaulting white women. White southern politicians, even suffragists, were quick to maximize the political capital of the rape fear by using it as the cornerstone of white supremacist campaigns. Rebecca Latimer Felton, Benjamin Tillman, Coleman Blease, Frances Willard, and James K. Vardaman were just a few who effectively exploited and inflamed white fears of black men to advance their causes, their careers, or both.<sup>73</sup>

For many white southerners in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, the image of the "black-beast-rapist" was reality. Confronted with attacks on the region for its failure to halt lynching, the myth provided the white South with a convenient justification for extralegal violence. If any white southerners doubted the existence of the "black-beast-rapist" they kept quiet. A number of prominent African Americans who recognized the sham of the rape myth did, however, speak out. In 1894 Frederick Douglass countered white musings on the "Negro Problem" by offering up "a colored man's view." In "Why is the Negro Lynched?" he exposed justifications of lynching as a charade: "Now, what is the special charge by which this ferocity is justified, and by which mob law is excused and defended even by good men North and South? It is a charge of recent origin; a charge never brought before; a charge never heard in the time of slavery or in any other time in our history. It is a charge of assaults by Negroes upon white women. This new charge, once fairly started on the wings of rumour, no matter by whom or in what manner originated, whether well or ill founded, whether true or false, is certain to raise a mob and to subject the accused to immediate torture and death."<sup>74</sup> Douglass knew all too well that in the South, any white woman, even "an abandoned woman," had only to cry rape and the wheels of the lynch mob would be set in motion.<sup>75</sup>

Perhaps no African American was more outspoken on the alleged "new crime" among black men than Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a journalist living in Memphis who edited the black newspaper *Free Speech*. In 1892, outraged by the lynching of three black grocery store owners, Wells infuriated the white community of Memphis by suggesting that white grocers, acting out of fear of economic competition, were responsible. Her editorializing on the real motives behind southern lynching eventually moved some white men to burn the office of *Free Speech* and threaten Wells's life should she ever return to Memphis. Wells moved to New York, where she continued to write and lecture passionately for the anti-lynching cause.<sup>76</sup>

Wells-Barnett referred to the increasing alarm about black rape in the South as a "racket." "Nobody in this section of the country believes the old thread bare lie that Negro men rape white women." She cited the behavior of male slaves during war as evidence that black men were not predisposed to commit outrages upon white women: "The world knows that the crime of rape was unknown during four years of civil war when the white women of the South were at the mercy of the race which is all at once charged with being a bestial one." Wells-Barnett cited case after case of black men betrayed by their white lovers, who for fear of vigilant neighbors, pregnancy, or venereal disease cried rape to avoid public scorn. In nearly all cases, the black men were lynched or barely escaped being lynched.

Wells-Barnett worked tirelessly to educate the country and the world to the atrocities that were being committed against black men in the name of white womanhood. So She framed her searing critique of lynching in the larger context of white oppression of blacks in general. During Reconstruction, she railed, whites justified violence and intimidation of southern blacks as necessary to rid the region of "Negro domination." Once disfranchisement rendered black men politically impotent and hence negated the threat of "Negro domination," southern whites were forced to look for a new excuse to terrorize its black population. The new excuse became the purported new wave of Negro assaults on white women.

Ida Wells-Barnett, along with other African American women, stood at the vanguard of the anti-lynching movement in the early 1890s. Mary Church Terrell also tried to combat lynching through the print medium. In an article in *North American Review* in 1904 Terrell wrote, "it is a great mistake to suppose that rape is the real cause of lynching in the South. . . . It is easy to

prove that rape is simply the pretext and not the cause of lynching." She claimed that 75 to 85 percent of men lynched were not even accused of sexual crimes. A study published in 1919 by the NAACP buttressed Terrell's claims. Among African American males lynched, only 28.4 percent were accused of rape or "attacks upon women." 83

Historians of the late-nineteenth-century South who wrote in the years following World War II, sensitized to racial oppression by the Holocaust and later by the struggles of the civil rights movement and the egregious racial injustices that precipitated it, fully discredited the last remnants of the Dunning school. Their work reflects the same critical stance as that of Wells, Douglass, and other contemporary critics who understood that white fears of black rape were both irrational and unfounded. Although no single published study focuses exclusively on the rape complex itself, numerous historians writing on related topics have attempted to offer up explanations for its emergence. These explanations have included the political, the economic, the psychosexual, and combinations of the three.

While contemporary historians do not agree on the causes of the rape complex, most nonetheless agree by and large on when it emerged. In a muchneeded corrective to earlier treatments, George Fredrickson linked the emergence of black rape fears to the development of racist ideology, which he tied to important political and economic markers. First, white fears of black political power were exacerbated by fusionist politics, the threatened alliance of white Populists with black Republicans in the 1890s. Second, the New South boosterism that had preached the saving graces of industrialism failed to create an economic boom. White southerners, displaced or disoriented by dizzying economic spasms, projected their disappointment onto the region's black population. Third, a significant consequence of segregation and the isolation of blacks had been to arouse suspicion among whites—What were the blacks up to? Thus the black male became a scapegoat for the political and economic tensions of the period. White southerners resorted to violence, lynching, and Jim Crow laws, all of which aimed at greater control over the region's black population. In an intriguing twist, Fredrickson argued that lynching preceded widespread sexual fears. White southerners constructed the image of the black male as a mad rapist with an insatiable sexual appetite to justify their barbarous treatment of the region's blacks.84 White southern men, appealing to a universal code of masculinity, rationalized lynching under the guise of defending their women and their honor.

Joel Williamson, like Fredrickson, situated the origins of the rape complex

in the 1890s. Unlike Fredrickson, however, Williamson placed greater emphasis on psychosexual motivation. Williamson explained that in the 1890s the southern white male had painted himself into a "sexual corner." The postbellum South had inherited the antebellum deification of white womanhood, and as earlier analysts have pointed out this tended to neuter white women. Owing a theoretical debt to Cash and Jordan, Williamson accepted the gendered double standard for sexuality: southern white women were presumed to be frigid, white men libidinous. By pressing reluctant wives to perform their "duty," Williamson reasoned, white men were forcing themselves on their women. In fact, it was the white men who were the "beasts" and thus found themselves in a psychosexual double bind: if they denied and repressed their sexual urges, they felt tension; but if they acted on those urges, they felt guilty and conflicted. Moreover, southern white men in the late nineteenth century no longer had slave women at their immediate disposal as in the years before the Civil War. As a result, after emancipation white men found themselves shut off sexually from both white and black women. In psychically working through their pent-up sexual tension, white men projected "upon black men extravagant sexual behavior. . . . To paint the black man as ugly and then to destroy him was to destroy the evil within themselves."85

Methodologically, Williamson's study rests on many of the same sources as Fredrickson's: essays and speeches by well-read, often well-known, prolific white southerners, who spoke authoritatively on the threat of black rape, painted with broad but unsubstantiated strokes, and claimed, by virtue of their race, to speak for all white southerners. Much of what we have come to know about white fears of black rape is based on this relatively narrow source base. Historians have gauged white fears of black rape by relying on it almost exclusively, declaring that the region's entire white population was gripped with anxiety about black rape. Works like Williamson's and Fredrickson's have not interrogated those claims nor sought out alternative white voices on the matter of rape fears. We are left to assume that these elite politicians, social scientists, and writers of the postbellum era, a sliver of the region's white population, spoke for all.<sup>86</sup> And the impact of the racist literature that perpetuated the image of the "black-beast-rapist" on the uneducated and inarticulate remains unexplored.

In some way, the argument put forth in Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's *Revolt against Chivalry* (1974) is reminiscent of Williamson's work and therefore places her analysis of the rape myth in the psychosexual camp. Her book focuses on the attempts of Jessie Daniel Ames, a white southern woman, to challenge the region's control of both black males and white women through

lynching. Like Williamson, Hall grounded the image of the black rapist in the conflicted Victorian age, a time when Americans were preoccupied with the contest between "civilization" and "savagery." The myth played out against a backdrop of clashing values and sexual tensions. "Sexual strivings—rejected, feared, and projected onto others—beat like a 'distracting savage drum' beneath the genteel discourse of white middle class life. . . . No image so dramatically symbolized the most lurid of Victorian fantasies and fears as that of violent sexual congress between a black man and a white woman." 88

Where Hall parts company with Williamson is in her observation that the threat of black rape not only gave white men a powerful tool with which to control the black population but also proved an effective means for keeping white women dependent on white men for protection, thereby shoring up white patriarchal control. "It may be no accident," she suggested, "that the vision of the Negro as threatening beast flourished during the first organizational phase of the women's rights movement in the South." Hall hypothesized that the origins of the rape complex had ties to a budding feminist impulse. Caught off balance by the emergence of unmanageable and noncompliant blacks and white women, southern white men latched onto the rape myth as the most effective means of controlling the region's blacks as well as white women.

At Hall's insistence, for the first time historians were being asked to look to the conditions affecting white women in the late nineteenth century for clues to the emergence of the black rape fear. In essence, Hall demanded that women get equal play in the analysis of white rape fears in the South. On one level, it is hard to imagine how in a study of such a gendered experience as rape, females could get anything less than equal treatment. But because so many black males were unjustly accused of sexually assaulting white females in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, and because so many of them faced lynch mobs as a result, it is easy to see how historians might react empathetically to the accused and antagonistically (or at least indifferently) to the accuser.

Approaching the subject of white rape fears of blacks with such a sensibility, however, has the consequence, unintended I am sure, of ignoring the impact that rape fears had on white women and removes them as significant agents (other than as false accusers). It also imperils any attempt to investigate incidents of black-on-white rape, specifically to entertain the possibility that black men could and did rape white women and girls. In short, the theoretical foundation laid by Cash, Jordan, and Williamson makes it virtually impossible to consider as credible a white woman's accusation of black rape in the nine-teenth-century South.

In Cash's and Jordan's accounts of the origins of the rape myth, white males are the dominant players: out in the slave quarters, having sex with their female slaves, then having nothing better to do than imagine their wives doing the same with the male slaves. White women are pathetic creatures who retreat into a world of passionlessness and remain sexually unfulfilled. Williamson's interpretation likewise evokes the image of sexually robust white men, busying themselves searching for no-fault, guilt-free sex. Again men, not women, are at center stage.

Jacquelyn Hall has called Williamson to task on this point and taken steps to distance her own gender war interpretation from that of Williamson on one important point. She has admonished Williamson for projecting his own masculine views onto his subjects and for positing a "universal male sex drive": "I saw rape not as sex but as violence. As a consequence, I read white men's identification with the so called black rapist as an expression of misogyny rather than as a projection of desire."

What Hall discovered in much of the rape myth scholarship was a white male identification with black men as victims. The works assumed that the charge of black rape was fabricated. The black man was always wrongly accused of rape by a poor white woman who, in an attempt to hide her indiscretion, "cried rape" and sacrificed her black paramour to the mob. Scholars like Williamson and Jordan have unwittingly identified with the predicament of the alleged "black rapist." Given the history of black men in slavery and freedom, such an identification is understandable. Nonetheless, it obscures the possibility that black men could and did sexually assault white females. As Hall has observed, the approach of Williamson and Jordan is infused with masculine and possibly misogynist overtones.

What for Hall had become a gender issue was for Nell Irvin Painter one primarily of class. Painter contends that sex "was the whip that white supremacists used to reinforce white solidarity, probably the only whip that would cut deeply enough to keep poor whites in line." Appeals to the preservation of property and wealth were futile if made to white men who had neither. In all likelihood, however, white men of voting age considered their women a form of property and could thus identify with white supremacist rhetoric that called for a unified front in protecting all white women regardless of class. 91

Glenda Gilmore's award-winning work *Gender and Jim Crow* (1996) builds on the analytical foundation laid by Hall and Painter and constitutes the first major work to consider how race, gender, and class converged with politics to contribute to the rise of white anxiety about black rape. Gilmore argues that poor white women for the first time became critical components of the white

supremacy apparatus in North Carolina in the 1890s. She found that the effects of industrialization and urbanization, and the attendant upheaval in gender roles, created a receptive climate for the myth of the black rapist among the state's white population. She also makes a strong case linking the political and economic advances of the African American middle class in the 1880s and early 1890s to the rise of white fears of black sexual aggression. By suggesting that black success fed a desire for social equality, the Democratic Party hoped to drive a wedge through the fusionist alliance of disgruntled whites and blacks and reap political advantage. 92

But Gilmore goes beyond racial politics to show that racial control was not the only benefit to be derived from Democrats' manipulation of rape fears. She confirms the speculation of Hall that white women also paid a price for buying into white fears of black sexuality. As Gilmore explains, the veneer of traditional gender conventions and roles had cracked under the effects of industrialization and urbanization and had given rise to working-class women who flouted prescribed modes of feminine behavior, a clear rejection of patriarchal dominance. In perpetuating the rape myth, the white South assured its women that only greater dependence on men and restricted mobility could ensure their safety and protection. The rape myth not only served the political ends of white supremacists but reined in wayward white women as well. The nadir of race relations in the South and the zenith of white fears of black rape coincided with challenges by the region's "respectable" women for more rights and greater voice in the public and private spheres, and with challenges by poorer white women whose behavior deviated from accepted norms.<sup>93</sup>

Ironically, the earliest scholarly attempts to explain the rise of white rape fears focused on men, black and white, with the role of women almost an afterthought. Women's historians have forced us to consider the role that white women played in creating the rape myth. Paradoxically, this much-needed corrective runs the risk of portraying white women as passive pawns, duped by white men of all classes into becoming increasingly dependent on their men. Recent studies on topics other than the rape myth itself shed light on how gender figures even more prominently in the development of white anxiety about black rape.

Jane Dailey's recent study of the Readjuster movement in Virginia, *Before Jim Crow*, is an important contribution to our understanding of the origins of the rape myth. For one thing, the subject of her study is the period after Reconstruction but before Jim Crow, a moment, albeit brief, in which blacks and whites worked together to craft "forgotten interracial political alternatives" that historians too often gloss over or dismiss, aware of the harsh and

rigid racism to come.<sup>94</sup> By calling attention to a time in the postemancipation South when racial attitudes had not yet hardened, Dailey allows us to understand how it is possible to imagine a time when white anxiety about black rape had not yet taken root. In Dailey's Virginia "before Jim Crow" it is easier to imagine how a black man accused of raping a white woman could have escaped a lynch mob.

Dailey's exploration of interracial political cooperation in Virginia documents the emergence of heightened concern about miscegenation in 1883, after two prominent African Americans were appointed to the Richmond school board. Integration of the school board, Dailey argues, unequivocally established black male authority over white female teachers and students. This inversion of the racial hierarchy laid bare the fiction of the political paradigm carefully constructed by the Readjusters, a coalition of black and white Virginians who forged a formidable interracial political alliance. White Readjusters, in an effort to allay concerns of whites who conflated black political and sexual rights, floated a "separate spheres" doctrine that clearly delineated public and private spaces and rights. Black men, it was imagined, could participate equally as citizens by serving in the public sphere, on juries and town councils. Black men, however, would operate in a racially segregated private sphere.

With the integration of the Richmond school board in 1883, white Democrats, many of whom had expressed fears of "social equality" since Reconstruction, finally attracted the attention of a worried audience, now more receptive to racist rhetoric about miscegenation. Opportunistic Democrats quickly made the leap from black political authority to sexual authority in the setting of public schools. African American school administrators would conceivably interview, hire, and supervise white female teachers. African American men would head classrooms filled with little white girls. One especially provocative political cartoon depicted an African American male teacher spanking a white girl. The sexual implications were clear. Vague allusions to blacks' political and sexual power had been bandied about since after the Civil War but were now infused with potency and harnessed, in the minds of concerned whites, to the tangible issue of schools. As Dailey asserts, the "schools had become the site on which white anxiety about the relationship between political rights and sex rights had been displaced." 95

Still, apprehension about miscegenation or improper physical contact between black men and white women or girls is not the same thing as alarm about black-on-white rape. Nonetheless, Dailey's periodization—rooting an increasing white preoccupation with interracial sexual contact in the mid-

1880s—coincides generally with the beginning of an increase in antiblack violence in the South, especially for perceived sexual transgressions.<sup>96</sup>

In an attempt to locate the origins of the rape myth more precisely, Martha Hodes builds a case for the gradual escalation of white rape fears through the 1890s, but sees emancipation and the ensuing conflict over the black man's proper political place as a watershed: "Black freedom brought a marked shift away from uneasy toleration for sex between black men and white women, and a move toward increasingly violent intolerance." Hodes roots this change in the "newfound autonomy of [black] men," largely because of the political power they acquired. "After emancipation, expressions of white anxiety about sex between black men and white women reached an unprecedented intensity."97 Like others, Hodes notes the precipitous rise of white-on-black violence, much of it sexual in nature, leading her to conclude that politics during Reconstruction had become "sexualized."98 Sex and race had become irretrievably political. Hodes offers evidence of testimony from a congressional investigation in 1871 into racial violence in the immediate postbellum years that is replete with accounts of white retribution for perceived sexual infractions by black men. The dialogue that emerged from this hearing, Hodes argues, "differed markedly from the neighborhood conversations about sex between black men and white women that had come to pass in antebellum communities."99

For Hodes, Reconstruction, specifically emancipation, abruptly ends a long-standing antebellum tradition of white toleration of interracial sex, and with it, moderate or even lenient treatment of blacks accused of white rape. But this conclusion is somewhat misleading, in large measure because Hodes has shifted her focus from local community records in the antebellum era to primarily government records after the Civil War. In a way, her conclusion is predetermined by the nature of her sources. The subject of the congressional investigation is the violence of the Ku Klux Klan, which of course was responsible for some of the most atrocious acts of racial terrorism in the postwar South. Accounts of ordinary or restrained white responses to allegations of black rape, decidedly not what the  $\kappa\kappa\kappa$  was accused of, were not likely to be recounted for the committee. Unmolested interracial couples, for the most part, are not going to show up in these records. Hodes may be correct in arguing for pervasive white anxiety about black rape during Reconstruction, but her evidence does not allow us to make that leap.

Having situated the "newly alarmist set of ideas about sex between black men and white women" squarely in the postbellum South, Hodes demonstrates that white anxiety about black rape, which emerged explosively during Reconstruction, continued to increase until it reached hysterical proportions at century's end. <sup>100</sup> Here Hodes collapses the time between the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of Jim Crow, as if drawing a seamless line from Reconstruction through the lynching craze. In this regard Hodes departs from the periodization laid out by Williamson, who grounded the rape myth's origins in the 1890s, following a decade of relative calm in racial matters in the South, and overlooks the more racially tolerant era "before Jim Crow" described by Dailey. The evidence that Hodes marshals, though, buttresses her claim. The cases that she interrogates demonstrate that southern whites increasingly responded with violence and intolerance to allegations of black-on-white sex, including rape. Yet a disproportionate amount of attention is paid to the rhetoric of black rape and to the more notorious cases of lynching, leaving us still unsure how whites living in southern communities dealt with accusations of black rape.

The 1890s were one of the most tumultuous decades in American history on competing and overlapping fronts. Race politics reached a fever pitch in the South, as populism mounted a viable, biracial, lower-class challenge to white Democratic rule. Disfranchisement and segregation became institutionalized throughout the South as white race "liberals" were drowned out by radical racists. Economic dislocations wrought anxiety as farmers lost their land and then migrated to mill towns where for the first time they encountered wage labor. Cheaper black labor cultivated ire and jealousy among poor white laborers and farmers. Fathers suffered the loss of patriarchal authority as daughters moved into factory work. A cacophony of tensions over class, gender, and race roles emanating from severe economic dislocation resounded all over the country. Historians have long debated which of these factors was most directly responsible for the rise in the white South's rape fears.

In the context of a larger study on crime and punishment in the nineteenth-century South, Edward Ayers in his book *Vengeance and Justice* (1984) grappled with the causes of the rape fear and the outbreak of lynching and racial violence in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Ayers assessed various theories on the origins of the rape complex. He astutely pointed out that many of the ingredients often cited as causes of white rape fears had been present throughout much of the South's earlier history: racism, poverty, political conflict, irrational white fears. Contending that "whites had long associated blacks with sexuality," Ayers is right to suspect that something unique about the period was at the root of the rape complex. He first considered populism. The unparalleled political threat posed by the fusion of poor whites and blacks would

seem a logical cause of vitriolic white supremacy, of which the rape myth became a critical component. Ayers did not see it this way. "Political passions may have helped fuel the lynching crisis of the nineties by creating racial animosity," he wrote, "but overt political motives apparently accounted for little of the bloodshed." <sup>101</sup>

If populism was not directly responsible for the rape and lynching crisis, then could it be that the onus for the rape fears lay, as Williamson and others have argued, in subconscious psychological tensions among whites about gender? Did blame lie, as Jacquelyn Hall suggested, with "masculine guilt over miscegenation, the veiled hostility toward women in a patriarchal society, the myths of black sexuality—a dense web of sexual violation and desperate rationalization"?<sup>102</sup> Ayers is unconvinced. "This cluster of fears stretched on for decades before and after the crisis of the early 1890s, though, and there seems little indication that any change in gender relationships in the rural South generated the largest wave of lynchings in American history. The mysterious recesses of sex and race provided much of the fuel for the conflagration of the nineties, but not the spark."<sup>103</sup>

Ayers offers several explanations that he believes are unique to the period and more likely to have ignited the rape and lynching crisis. He argued that a "widespread and multifaceted crisis rocked the South" in the late 1880s and 1890s. The market economy that had infiltrated even the mountainous recesses of the South by the late nineteenth century now subjected more of its inhabitants to the precarious whims of the business cycle. 104 The late 1880s saw the beginning of dire economic conditions that directly affected the lives of more southerners than ever before. One of the byproducts of the economic crisis was a crime wave precipitated by geographic and occupational dislocation that bred criminals of a new sort, whose crimes were more serious and whom W. E. B. Du Bois described as "bad niggers," "a class of black criminals, loafers, and ne'er-do-wells who are a menace to their fellows, both black and white." 105

Exacerbating the bleak economic and unstable conditions, Ayers continued, was the chronological and geographical space that had settled between the white and black communities in the South as a result of segregation. "The 'best' whites and blacks seldom had contact with one another, as both races increasingly withdrew into their own neighborhoods and churches. Virtually no white man under fifty years old in 1890 would have once been master of a slave plantation. At the time the lynching crisis hit the South no man under thirty years old, white or black, would have any memory of slavery at all—only of racial distrust, conflict, and bloodshed. . . . These men, white and black, feared each other with the fear of ignorance. They saw each other dimly, at a

distance."<sup>106</sup> This sea of mistrust and suspicion no doubt accounts for numerous allegations by women of sexual assault: conditioned to fear black men and having little or no regular contact with them, these women probably misinterpreted approaches and acts of insolence as sexual affronts. By the turn of the century those acts of real and imagined black sexual aggression described by Ayers and others were more often than not punished swiftly through extralegal means. <sup>107</sup>

The impact of industrialization and urbanization that Ayers, Gilmore, and others describe propelled poor white southern women into visibility and made them players in the racial politics of the region. Economic convulsions also ushered in revolutionary changes in sexual ideology that contributed to evolving ideas about rape and race in the South. Numerous young girls migrated, often unaccompanied, to cities and mill towns in search of employment. Exposed to new forms of sexual exploitation—by coworkers, supervisors, landlords, strangers—and temptation, these "women adrift" attracted the attention of moralistic reformers who sought to check male sexual prerogatives and challenge the double standard of morality that they saw at the root of sexual danger, and prompted a nationwide campaign for the moral protection of young women.

Moral reformers set out to purge society of illicit sexual conduct and to promote social purity. Eventually anti-prostitution campaigns gave way to other reforms, such as an attack on white slave traffic, prison reform, and sex education. In the 1880s moral crusaders turned their attention to state rape statutes. They lobbied state legislatures to raise the age of consent, generally from the age of ten in most states. <sup>108</sup> By the late 1880s the campaign had become a national movement. Aggressive crusades were launched in virtually every state and continued through the 1890s. While the reformers registered important victories in many states, the South as a region lagged behind. Several southern states—Alabama, South Carolina, and North Carolina—stubbornly refused to raise their statutory age of consent from ten. Mississippi even *lowered* its age of consent to ten from twelve!<sup>109</sup>

The southern variant of the age-of-consent reform campaigns was of course inexorably infused with race. Southern legislators stubbornly resisted raising age-of-consent reforms out of fear that African American women and girls could then use the revised statutes to prosecute white offenders. Reviving age-old stereotypes about black women's innate lasciviousness, white southern lawmakers opposed efforts to raise the age of consent on the grounds that such a law placed the "negro female on the same plane as the white female." The Kentucky legislator A. A. Tompkins in 1895 went so far as to say that African

American females, because of their "natural complaisance," could not be raped. 110 Still another white southerner warned, "To raise the age of consent ... would enable loose young women, both white and black, to wreak a fearful vengeance on unsuspecting young men. . . . Who of us that has a boy sixteen years old would be willing to see him sent to the penitentiary on the accusation of a servant girl?" White male opposition to rape reform in the South represented a thinly veiled reluctance to relinquish institutionalized sexual exploitation of black women, what Jacquelyn Hall has termed the "cornerstone of patriarchal power in the South." 112

White women reformers understood that the unspoken source of resistance to raising the age of consent was unfettered white male sexual access to white, as well as nonwhite, women. Leslie Dunlap, in her work on age-of-consent campaigns in the South, asserts that white women, through their activism, sought to stop white men from having sex with African American women. In doing so, they challenged this white male privilege, thus putting white men on the defensive. 113

African American activists had long challenged the sexual double standard that permitted white men to sexually exploit nonwhite females without molestation but harshly punished black men who assaulted white women (or more accurately, were perceived to have sexually abused white women). Ida B. Wells-Barnett, for one, exposed such hypocrisy when she published accounts of white men whose sexual assaults of African American girls and women went unnoticed by the press and white communities. She relayed the brutal lynching in Nashville of a black man, Ephraim Grizzard, who had allegedly dared merely visit a white woman. "At the very moment when these civilized whites were announcing their determination 'to protect their wives and daughters,' by murdering Grizzard, a white man was in the same jail for raping eight-year-old Maggie Reese, colored girl. He was not harmed."114 Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Nannie Burroughs were but two African American women who joined Wells-Barnett in challenging white men's sexual prerogative at the turn of the century.115 Both black and white women had complained about sexual abuse of slaves, but usually privately and to other women. At the turn of the century, however, these women, however discreetly and obliquely, broached the taboo of white men's exploitation of sex with black women and girls.

The national and regional debate about such topics as rape and consensual sex was not welcomed in the South. For one thing, the sensibilities of many white southerners had been offended by such explicit talk of sexuality. An editorial in the *Atlanta Constitution* in 1886 denounced the effort to reform rape laws, decrying it a "public indecency": "There are some evils unfit for

public discussion, and this is one of them. . . . Some reforms are not to be spoken of in mixed company or mentioned in print."<sup>116</sup> And the uncomfortable discussions threatened much more than one's sensibilities. As Mary Odem has observed, "To take on the double standard and male sexual license in the South could mean confronting the practice of interracial sex and the sexual vulnerability of black women and girls at the hands of white men."<sup>117</sup>

The rise of the rape myth and the contemporaneous discourse about sex, rape, and the proper boundaries of consensual sex are more than just coincidence. Greater sensitivity to sexual abuse and heightened concern about rape in general were an outgrowth of the purity crusade. For the first time southerners were introduced to a social lexicon that included rape, to a discourse that teemed with cautionary tales of sordid sexual license. Sexual assault was no longer something to be whispered about; it was being debated openly in the halls of the legislature and in the pages of the local newspapers. Rape—at the same time race relations were the most strained, and political and economic times most volatile—became part of the southern consciousness as never before.

Just as unsettling to many white southerners, indeed to many middle- and upper-class Americans, was the manifestation of transforming ideas about sexuality and gender, specifically as they related to women's sexual nature. The turn of the century marked the waning days of Victorian sexual ideology, a central tenet of which denied women a libido but granted men license to indulge uncontrollable biological urges. Men were naturally sexually aggressive; women, passionless.<sup>118</sup> An expressive sexuality would have been regarded as irreconcilable with the spiritual and moral superiority that a mother and wife supposedly possessed. But sweeping changes wrought by the expansion of industrial capitalism, including the migration of many young girls and women into the paid workforce, hastened a new era of sexuality. As young girls withdrew from families and paternal supervision into the public world of work, they achieved unprecedented autonomy and independence. Shunning "respectability," a new generation of young women sought out the company of men in public spaces like street corners and amusement parks, wore makeup and high heels, and danced provocatively. Women, it seemed after all, did possess sexual desire, a realization that proved disturbing and unsettling to many who responded with attempts to control and police women's sexuality.<sup>119</sup>

Played out against the backdrop of the Jim Crow South, white society now faced the startling possibility that (white) women possessed a healthy desire for sex. It followed then that if women desired men sexually, they might actually desire black men. So when Alexander Manly, editor of the only African Ameri-

can newspaper in North Carolina, in 1898 goaded his readers with the comment that "white girls of culture and refinement" might actually find black men "sufficiently attractive," he hit a raw nerve. <sup>120</sup> So did Ida B. Wells-Barnett when she publicly disclosed that a white woman in Memphis loved a black man. <sup>121</sup> The real source of the rape charges was white women attracted to black men, who cried rape to avoid social censure upon discovery of their consensual interracial relationship. In an attack on lynching in 1887, Jesse C. Duke, editor of the *Montgomery Herald*, flatly rejected white women's charges of rape against black men. Rather, he suspected "the growing appreciation of the white Juliet for the colored Romeo as he becomes more intelligent and refined." <sup>122</sup>

Yet another pillar holding up southern culture was disintegrating. Not just any pillar, but one of the chief weight-bearing pillars upon which so many axioms of white southern society had rested. The sanctity of white womanhood defined the South, old and new. Southern gentlemen fashioned themselves as protectors of the pure and chaste and justified their position at the apex of the gender, racial, and social hierarchies on the basis of white purity. It is no coincidence, as Martha Hodes has noted, that "just as white ideas about the dangers of black men intensified after emancipation so, too, did white ideology about the purity of white women." 123

The late nineteenth century was not hospitable to white men of the South. Politically, white southern men felt under siege. Unprecedented interracial political alliances throughout much of the region posed formidable challenges to race and class hegemony. The market economy wreaked havoc on isolated southern enclaves, bringing with it the disruptive forces that threatened white patriarchal control. Long-standing features of the South—racism, honor, widespread poverty, a weak state<sup>124</sup>—were now joined by an array of other developments: changes in gender behavior and roles; renewed concerns about black contacts with white females; a new willingness to debate taboo subjects such as rape and sexual behavior. Together these made the South an incubator for unparalleled fear of the black rapist.

while historians may wrangle over the precise origins of the rape myth, or the extent to which antebellum white southerners were animated by stereotypes of black sexual aggression, all agree on one fundamental truth: there was a rape myth. That is to say, there was a time when white southerners were convinced that black men posed a unique sexual threat to white women. There was a time in the South when a black man who stood accused of raping a white woman would surely die, whether by legal execution or by lynching. Evidence abounds. The venomous political diatribes of Ben

Tillman, Rebecca Lattimer Felton, and Cole Blease testify to the widespread sexual alarm among whites about black rapists. Scores of black men dangled at the end of a rope, charged with "the usual offense." Surely this spoke to a people consumed by the irrational fear that white women needed to be protected from the savage, predatory beast, the black man. Or did it?

While much of the recent literature on race and rape has authoritatively established, in the words of Martha Hodes, that "white anxiety about sex between white women and black men is not a timeless phenomenon in the United States," it nonetheless posits that a fundamental change was effected in how southern whites came to view black male sexuality by the twentieth century. 125 The very latest scholarly consideration of the rape myth might lead some to wonder: What rape myth? Lisa Lundquist Dorr has examined black-on-white rape in Virginia in the twentieth century. The questions raised by her findings point to new directions in the discussion about the rape myth, not the least of which is whether there was ever a time when death for an accused black rapist was foreordained. The statistics that Dorr marshals give us reason to pause. Of the 288 men accused of black-on-white sexual assault whom she identified in Virginia between 1900 and 1960, only about one-fourth were either lynched or executed. 126

Dorr's analysis of the black rape in the twentieth-century South makes a compelling case for the continuity camp of southern historiography. Like their nineteenth-century counterparts, white southerners in the twentieth century who encountered charges of black-on-white rape stubbornly resisted acting out of their common whiteness. "White men did not automatically leap to the defense of white women." 127 Instead, they sometimes aligned with a black neighbor they had known for years over a white accuser new to the area. A white employer might intercede on behalf of his black laborer. White Virginians might side with an accused black rapist when his accuser was known to have an especially sullied reputation. These cases show, Dorr argues, that "significant continuities existed between nineteenth and twentieth century treatment of black-on-white rape, as white legal elites incorporated attitudes about gender, sexuality, respectability, and class status in determining what constituted 'justice' for convicted black men." 128

Dorr's findings raise another question. If, as she claims, white responses to black-on-white rape were not uniform in twentieth-century Virginia, how is it that we have come to expect the "usual" response to have been death, at the hands of either an executioner or a vengeful mob? For one, Dorr explains, our customary frame of reference for twentieth-century black rape has been the most notorious cases, such as Scottsboro, which did elicit a rabidly racist

response from most white southerners. Historians have also focused a great deal on lynching, much of it purported to have been in response to black rape. Dorr suggests that our understanding of black-on-white rape in the twentieth century has been shaped by the most egregious white reactions to black rape, which have received a disproportionate share of historians' scholarly attention. Her examination of "less notorious cases" suggests that what we have seen as the usual response to black rape may actually have been the exception.

Finally, Dorr's work prompts us to ask *how* this was possible. Given what we know about the hardened race lines in the twentieth century, and about the well-established fears of black rape embedded in white southern culture, how could black men accused of raping white women receive due process, let alone leniency? The answer, Dorr explains, lies in the nature of segregation. Relying heavily on the recent cultural analysis of racial segregation by Grace Elizabeth Hale, Dorr argues for the malleability of segregation, specifically its "ability to allow local improvisation within the basic southern script." By this she means that in practice, segregation was never as rigid as the rhetoric might lead us to think it was. Rather, segregation "could mutate to fit and control the circumstances of any mixed race southern community."129 Analogizing black-white relations to a play with a script, a "theater of racial difference," Hale and Dorr contend that the boundaries between black and white, though definitive, were hardly impenetrable.<sup>130</sup> "Though the rules of segregation seemed clear, the boundaries around cross racial interaction remained elastic," permitting southern whites to tolerate some cross-racial sexual affairs (and treating ones that went awry with some leniency) while holding the feet of some malefactors to the fire. Messy day-to-day living often blurred segregation's precise racial boundaries. Twentieth-century southerners knew this, and therefore made accommodations on the "stage" of racial performance. 131 Dorr's study reveals a disjuncture between the rhetoric of race and rape on the one hand and how twentieth-century southerners lived race and rape in the American South on the other. While the discourse about black male sexuality (and purity and female whiteness) crystallized in the twentieth century, Dorr questions whether practice followed suit, thus providing a fruitful line of inquiry for future scholars.

It is clear that the debate over race and rape in the American South has had a long and contested history. It is equally obvious that the historiography of the rape myth is a convoluted one, a morass of half-truths and untruths, steeped in a cauldron of myth and misconception. Unraveled and disentangled, what does the evolution of scholarship about rape and race reveal about the bigger picture of race relations in America?

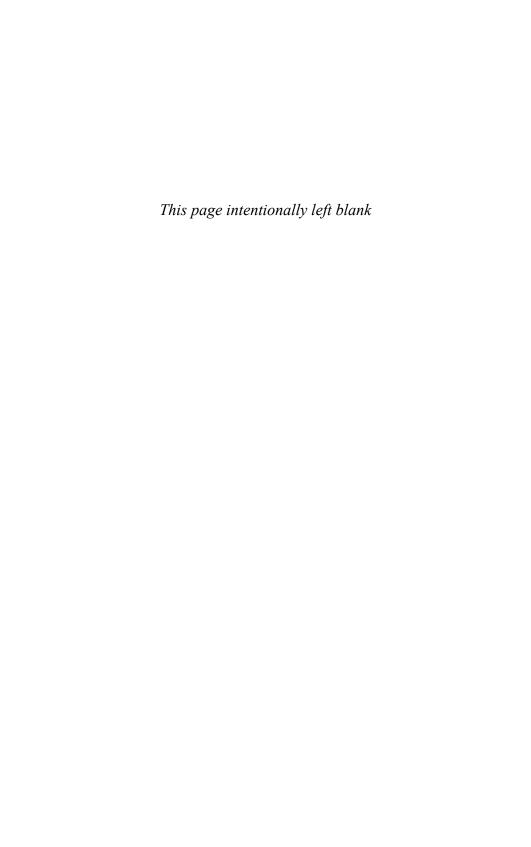
One of the most important insights that this discussion has yielded is just how very complicated lived relations were in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century South. Much historical scholarship of the South has lulled us into thinking that race was foremost in shaping the behavior of nineteenth-century southerners and has anesthetized us to competing or even contradictory possibilities. Because readily identifiable boundaries are so tempting, it made sense to imagine a region in which categories of race were carefully delineated and respected. Nell Painter has been especially critical of historians of the South and has called on historians to go "beyond lazy characterizations in the singular" and to recognize "the complex and contradictory nature of southern society." "Though southern history must take race very seriously," she has cautioned, "southern history must not stop with race." 132

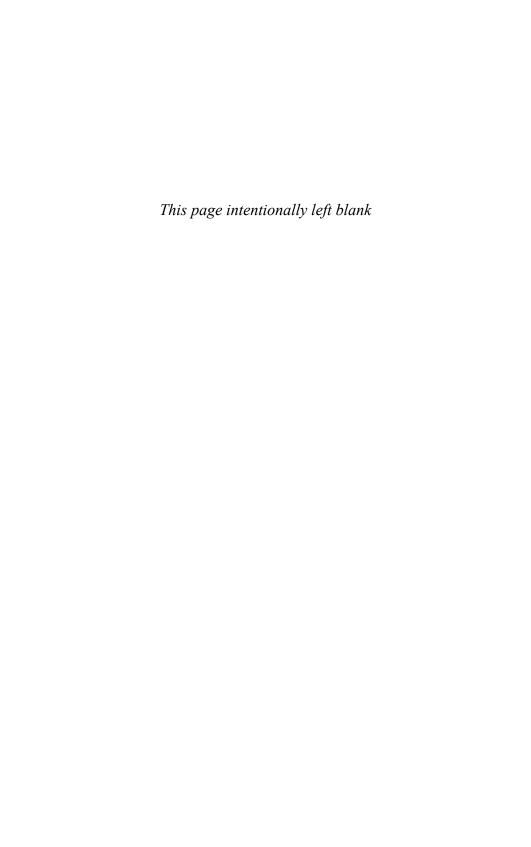
Nor must southern historians use race as their starting point, a long-standing practice that has tended to mute the inherent contradictions of antebellum southern society. What a survey of the historical treatment of the rape myth demonstrates is that historians, equipped with the knowledge of black victimization in the Jim Crow era, including the venomous rhetoric of black rape, have made claims for widespread white anxiety about black rape in the antebellum era when it did not exist. Stripped of such preconceptions, we can see an Old South in which there was far greater fluidity in race relations—and less in class relations—than historians heretofore have been willing to recognize. The recent scholarship by Hodes, Bynum, and others, including my own, reveals that peculiar cross-racial alliances underscore the complex web of contested loyalties confronting antebellum southerners. An appreciation of the fissures in the mind of white southerners along the fault lines of gender, race, and class may lead to a more complete understanding of how various groups within southern society were configured in relation to each other. Simply stated, what we learn from exploring the historiography of the rape myth is that race represented only one of a number of competing interests, and frequently one of the other interests prevailed. As Painter has reminded us recently, "Knowing a person's race, whatever that is, does not automatically tell you much about that person's life history."133

The survey of rape myth historical literature sheds light on a second area in the history of the South: the ongoing debate about continuity and change. And on this score, there is no consensus. Relying on the traditional demarcation of the Civil War as a watershed, we find agreement between such disparate individuals as Myrta Lockett Avary and Martha Hodes. Separated by time, profession, and most importantly sensibilities, the two nonetheless view the emancipation of slaves as a critical development in how whites came to view black

sexuality and the threat to white females. For Avary, and for her generation of white Lost Cause adherents, Reconstruction marked an abrupt and unwanted change, the end of slavery. With political power came demands for social equality for black men. In mapping out white attitudes toward interracial sex, Hodes views the emancipation of slaves as the seat of important changes in perceptions about black sexuality that only intensified by the end of the century. For others-Williamson, Hall, Fredrickson-the marker for significant change was not the Civil War and Reconstruction but rather the late nineteenth century, when a panoply of political, social, and economic changes resonated throughout the region, crystallizing along fears of black rape. And in the most singular departure of all, Lisa Dorr suggests that claims for discontinuity have in fact been overstated. Uncovering overlooked black-on-white rape cases, she finds evidence of significant continuity between white attitudes about black sexuality and rape in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a continuity which, as she notes, stands in "glaring contradiction to the accepted historical paradigm."134

In a peculiar way, Dorr's findings bring us back full circle to the work of Winthrop Jordan, who argued for the continuity of white anxiety about black rape beginning in the colonial era, offering it as evidence of a timeless continuum in the American South. Dorr, though, in contrast to Jordan, offers that the continuity is marked by *lack* of white anxiety about black rape. In addition, what Jordan took to be rigid racial boundaries—"black" over "white"—for Dorr were fluid, malleable categories that functioned loosely as guides. Perhaps race relations, in practice, had always existed on a continuum of tension with ideological dogma. But by focusing on the more notorious and highly publicized cases of black-on-white rape, including lynchings, perhaps we have jumped to erroneous conclusions about race and sex in the twentieth-century South. A courtroom observer in the Scottsboro rape trial in 1933 took exception to the defense attorney's attempt to discredit the accuser's testimony, claiming she was "a 'lewd woman'" and a "'girl tramp." The observer countered, falling into step with white supremacy rhetoric, that she "might be a fallen woman, but by God she is a white woman."135 Perhaps we have erred in assuming that this white man spoke for the majority of white southerners.





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Superior Court Minute Book, 1841-85

Pittsylvania County

Court Order Book, 1860-63

Powhatan County

Court Order Book, 1851-56

Prince Edward County

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Pulaski County

Circuit Court Order Book, 1857-76

Court Order Book, 1839-50

List of Felons, 1872-1926

Rappahannock County

Court Minute Book, 1866-71

Richmond City

Hustings Court Minutes, no. 29, 1863-66

List of All Persons Convicted of a Felony, 1870-96

Richmond Directory, 1860

Roanoke County

List of Persons Convicted of a Felony, 1870-1966

Rockbridge County

Court Minute Book, 1831-34

Register of Free Negroes, 1831-60

Secretary of the Commonwealth, Pardon Papers

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Register of Births, 1857-85

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